

Lab Staff Needed as a Critical Resource for COVID-19

Saskatoon – SEIU-West Health care providers who work in Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) laboratories are wondering how the government intends to increase testing capacity to 4,000 in early September.

“It’s a lofty goal but unattainable if you don’t have the staff to do the actual work,” says Barbara Cape, President of SEIU-West. “Medical Laboratory Technologists (MLTs) and Medical Laboratory Assistants (MLAs) are working copious amounts of overtime already because we can’t recruit and retain our current staffing mix in the lab – and one big reason is that the SHA is just not paying them what they are worth.”

In their August 18 news release, the Saskatchewan Government announced that they are working toward increasing capacity to 4,000 tests in early September. But like many other pandemic plans set out by the SaskParty Government, there is no realistic plan on how to get there, perhaps because the plans change constantly.

“The fact is that in many facilities, the physical space to process, analyze and transport this many tests – even if they are spread across the province – is simply non-existent,” said Carla Saworski, Medical Laboratory Technologist (MLT) and member of SEIU-West. “This increase would mean that Lab Assistants would need to sort swabs at the collection point – health care workers; general population; and those showing symptoms – and send them off to the two labs who are doing the tests that are already busy. Will this extra workload be put on our smaller rural labs, some of whom are already suffering from cuts in service?”

Years of systemic budget cuts to front line health care services have resulted in a health system that is bursting at the seams with demand for services that were quietly defunded, cut, or privatized by the SaskParty Government. This strategy is felt most keenly in lab services where employers are attempting to de-skill the workforce, while also demanding staff work more for less pay.

“Lab staff are directed to prioritize COVID tests to ensure the shortest wait time possible,” adds Cape. “This pushes back other routine outpatient testing to later into the night which means there is a time delay in relaying critical results to physicians, which can create treatment delays for patients.”

Service Employees International Union West (SEIU-West) represents over 13,000 people across Saskatchewan. They include people who work in health care, education, municipalities, community-based organizations, retirement homes and other sectors. They are joined by one colour – purple – and one union – SEIU-West. Visit PurpleWorks.ca to find out more about SEIU-West members.

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